

OU law professor Cheryl Wattlely's superb remarks at the January 15th Interfaith Breakfast Celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King's Birthday.

#### "THE CHALLENGE"

Presentation by Cheryl Brown Wattlely©  
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I am honored and privileged to have been asked to be the speaker for this morning's breakfast, but I must confess that I stand here before you with a slight sense of trepidation. For I know that when we hear the name Martin Luther King Jr. our minds are filled with memories and images of Dr. King. We see him standing in his brimmed hat and suit getting ready to board a Montgomery City Bus after the successful boycott. We see him standing before hundreds of thousands of persons gathered in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial at the March on Washington. We see him in his evening wear accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. We see him with his arms linked in the front line of marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus bridge on the march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights. Perhaps we even see him standing behind President Lyndon Baines Johnson at the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

And with those visual images, we also hear his voice. We hear that thunderous, melodious baritone, speaking words of eloquence and giving messages of inspiration, determination and motivation. We hear him speaking of his dream for America, his pronouncement that he had been to the mountaintop and his prediction that a day would come when it could be proclaimed that we were "free at last". And we hear his voice leading the marchers in the song that became the anthem for the civil rights movement: "We Shall Overcome."

Speaking before a group with this back drop of Dr. King is indeed a most daunting task. But I take strength and encouragement from the fact that by your presence here this morning, you show that you get it. You get that the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday is more than a day off from work; it is more than a chance to sleep late; to take care of all of those personal errands that never seem to be completed; or to catch that movie you've been wanting to see or even to watch the playoff football game that you recorded from yesterday. You understand that the celebration of this holiday requires more, indeed Congress in 1994 proclaimed that this holiday should be a day of service.

We can approach the MLK holiday in two ways. We can talk about the accomplishments of his leadership; the brilliant strategic approach and logistical acumen that brought non-violent resistance to cities across this nation; the continued encouragement that kept bus riders walking and protest marchers marching. We can talk about Dr. King's instructions and training on non-violent resistance that allowed children to remain steadfast even in the face of the Birmingham police attack dogs, lunging, straining on their leashes with teeth bared, snarling and growling; or that allowed the marchers to try to stand against the high pressure power of fire hoses, hoses that were designed to put out flames but that were being used instead in an effort to extinguish hope and determination. We can speak of Dr. King's heartfelt sorrow and anguish as he delivered the funeral eulogy for Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair, four young girls who were sitting in the 16th Street Baptist Church Sunday school classroom, their lives abruptly ended with the explosion of a bomb. We can reference the repeated arrests that did not silence his voice or weaken his endurance; the bombings of his home that threatened his wife and children yet served to strengthen his resolve; the almost daily death threats that were designed to intimidate and frighten him but that instead helped to fortify his message. We could praise his tireless commitment, the almost 400 speeches and appearances that he did annually. We could talk of the changes that his leadership brought, how he helped to ignite feelings of dignity and respect within a people that had suffered decades of denigration and disparagement. And in doing so we would talk about how he helped to transform this nation and this world.

But in talking of all of these things, we would be looking backwards, we would be looking to the past, at what has been. And this morning, I want to look forward. I want to take just a moment and talk about some of the lessons that Dr. King taught, some of his lesser known speeches and sermons to see whether within those words there is a message that might challenge us today; whether there is a meaning that might arouse within us the desire to action, an urgency to join in the continuing battle for human rights. For while legalized segregation has been relegated to our history books, we have moved into a time and place where as Dr. King said, "our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class and our nations; and this means we must develop a world perspective."<sup>1</sup> We must acknowledge that the boundaries of our nation are impacted by global concerns and so we must be deliberate about the achievement of human rights, here in Norman, in Oklahoma, the United States and the world. We must be ready to answer the call to assure the recognition of the inherent dignity and rights of all persons. Rights that have been endorsed by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to life, liberty and security of the person; right to equality under the law; the right to freedom of thought and opinion; the right to work and have compensation adequate to support an existence worthy of human dignity; the right to a standard of living adequate for health care and well being; and the right to education.

Are we ready then to become drum majors for these rights, for justice, equality, and dignity? Are we ready to play a part in continuing Dr. King's quest for the attainment of human rights for all persons?

It is fitting that we begin the celebration of Martin Luther King holiday with an interfaith breakfast. Dr. King was obviously a man of tremendous faith; he openly acknowledged that he was strengthened and carried by his belief in a personal God. And within the civil rights movement, persons of different faith practices found a common mission, a joint undertaking that transcended differences to allow a community focused on obtaining civil rights for African Americans.

But there is another reason why it is so appropriate that this is an interfaith breakfast: Dr. King proclaimed his movement to be a spiritual one. He believed and taught that effective non-violent resistance, that any successful movement for social change, revolved around two essential components: the human personality and spirituality. Human personality --- not whether you are friendly and outgoing, or shy and quiet, not the type of outward characteristics that most commonly come to mind ---- but rather a more philosophical, transcendent conception of personality.

Dr. King, in a sermon before the congregation of the Ebenezer Baptist Church which he co-pastored with his father spoke of this concept of human personality in a sermon entitled "A Tough Mind and A Tender Heart."<sup>2</sup> He used Matthew 10:16 as his scriptural basis for the sermon. At this point in Matthew's text, Jesus has chosen his disciples and he is instructing them as to where and how they should go forth to preach. Jesus tells his disciples in that portion of Matthew 10:16 read by Dr. King, "be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

Dr. King drew from this scripture, adding to it the framework of a French philosopher who said "No man is strong unless he bears within his character antitheses strongly marked."<sup>3</sup> To be a strong person we must have within ourselves opposite characteristics,

we must have conflicting perspectives that contradict and inform each other. For Dr. King, those opposites were the toughness of the serpent and the tenderness of the dove, what he termed a tough mind and a tender heart.

Tough-mindedness allows a person, and I quote, "to break through the crust of legends and myths and sift the truth from the falsehood. A tough-minded person is astute and discerning and has a strong, austere quality that makes for firmness of purpose and solidness of commitment. Those who are tough minded willingly engage in the hard, solid thinking. The tough-minded person examines facts before reaching conclusions."<sup>4</sup>

But being tough-minded isn't enough. Dr. King told his congregation, "by itself toughmindedness creates a "hardhearted man; an isolated island; an individual who never sees people as people, but rather as mere objects or as impersonal cogs in an ever-turning wheel. He depersonalizes life."<sup>5</sup>

To have serpentlike qualities devoid of dovelike attributes is to be passionless, mean and selfish. Conversely to have dovelike attributes without serpentlike qualities is to be sentimental, anemic and aimless.

But having that human personality alone is not enough. It must be cloaked and protected by a sense of spirituality, an abiding understanding and good will that is reflected in the Greek word for love "agape."<sup>6</sup> As defined by Dr. King, it is "an overflowing love that is God operating within the human heart." The tough-mindedness and tenderheartedness that Dr. King speaks of must be wrapped up in and nurtured by, in the words of Dr. King, a "firm belief that the universe is on the side of justice."<sup>7</sup> A faith in the future, a belief that God, by whatever name this Supreme Being may be called, is on the side of truth and freedom – what Dr. King called a "creative force in the universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole."<sup>8</sup>

It takes both of these characteristics, shaping and molding, colliding, and melding together fueled by spirituality to create a person who understands that, as Dr. King said, life's most persistent and urgent question is "what are you doing for others?"

Drawing from these lessons, then, in order to do for others, to move forward towards the attainment of human rights for all persons, we must become, in Dr. King's words, tough-minded enough to break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half-truths, and ignorance. We must be tough-minded enough to be steadfast to our obligation to work towards the fulfillment of human rights for all persons, here in this country and abroad, from the red dirt of Norman Oklahoma to the dirt pathways of Uganda and Zambia. We must be tough-minded and yet tenderhearted to be able to, paraphrasing the words of Dr. King, "walk in the light of creative altruism rather than languish in the darkness of destructive selfishness."

For if we develop these qualities of tough-mindedness and tenderheartedness and allow ourselves to be enveloped by spiritual faith we become a people who know and understand what Dr. King meant when he told us that "the time is always right to do that which is right."

So the challenge before us this morning is to ask the question, what could we accomplish, what could we achieve if we were to bring together people with such a human personality supported by spirituality.

What if we were to approach the problem of poverty with a tough-mindedness that brings a firm sense of commitment to every person's right to work with compensation adequate to support an existence worthy of human dignity for all persons complemented by the attitude of compassion for those who bear the burden of inadequate resources?

What if we were to address inadequate health care with a tough-mindedness that examined the supposed justifications and explanations for the absence of health care both in this country and abroad with the tenderheartedness that understands that every life has value, that every person has a right to health care?

What if we were to participate in dialogue and discussion, debate and discourse, with the tough-mindedness to engage in hard, solid thinking but marked with the tenderheartedness of respect and a genuine willingness to listen to others?

What if we were to leave this place this morning understanding that there may be no easy way to create a world where men and women live together with full equality, where people can have jobs and economic sufficiency; where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb and as much health care as their bodies may need. But we leave understanding that if such a world is to be created, it will be accomplished by persons who have the courage to put an end to the suffering of others appreciating that they may have to suffer themselves to achieve that world.

What if there was a tough-minded commitment to reject racism, sexism and materialism accompanied by a tenderhearted desire for brotherhood, cooperation, and peace and a spiritual understanding that the world is to exist in harmony?

Dr. King's life has shown us that when we have the personality of tough-mindedness and tenderheartedness cloaked in spirituality, we have the power to transform these "what ifs" into "why nots?" That we shall overcome when the mountains of hatred and prejudice, fear and ignorance, selfishness and self-interest can be leveled. That we shall overcome when the bridges and highways are transformed into the pathways that lead to equality and justice. That we shall overcome when dignity and respect, hope and brotherhood can flourish. That we shall overcome when the barriers that obstruct universal human rights are brought down because people believing in the harmony of the universe come together.

So on this day, this morning, let each of us go forth, drawing from Dr. King's words that with faith in the future and a determined struggle, we can emerge from man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice, that we can emerge into a dawning of human rights for all citizens of this world; into a sunrise of hope and opportunity. Let us go forth draped in the promise of a morning sun that indeed we shall overcome.

Thank you.

#### Citations

1 "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" delivered by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. before the Ebenezer Baptist Church on December 24, 1967.

2 "A Tough Mind and A Tender Heart" delivered by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. before the Ebenezer Baptist Church on August 30, 1959.

3 Id.

4 Id.

5 Id.

6 *An Experiment in Love*, 1958.

7 Id.

8 Id.